

Cousins in the Faith: Jews and Christians [OR Be Salty & Shiny (Not That Kind of Salty¹)]
Isaiah 58:1-9a, 1 Corinthians 2:1-12, and Matthew 5:13-20
Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church, Denver, February 5, 2023

Salt makes the world a better place. Those of us who have ever been put on a salt restriction know that salt becomes obvious when it's missing. I was talking with an Augustana friend recently who relocated to a Senior Living near her son. When I asked how the food was, she said it was okay but that in meeting the various residents' health needs there was a lack of salt and seasoning in the food. Saltshakers are not on the table and so she brings her own salt shaker to the meal. (I have filed this smart tip away for use at a later date.) Salt is one of those things for which a little goes a long way. I've ruined a perfectly good egg salad sandwich or two being heavy handed with the shaker. Salt, though, when applied properly, works with food to make it better.² Light is similar. Light brightens what already exists to help us perceive the world around us.³

When Jesus calls his followers "salt" and "light," he is calling them "salt" and "light" as a group. We've talked before about how our Southern friends do better translating the plural "you," as in "y'all," or "all y'all" for emphasis. Here's a quick example. Continuous with the Bible reading from last Sunday on the Beatitudes to today's reading, we hear Jesus say to his disciples:

All y'all are the salt of the earth...all y'all are the light of the world...let all y'all's light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." [Matthew 5:13-14, 16]

When we sing, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine," we don't ordinarily sing it by ourselves. Does anyone do that? I can think of one person who probably does. Most of us have maybe hummed it a time or two in our heads as it echoes

¹ "Salty" is a word used as urban slang to mean bitter or upset.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/salty#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Online%20Etymology%20Dictionary%2C%20the%20U.S.,as%20%22looking%20stupid%E2%80%A6%20because%20of%20something%20you%20did%22.>

² Melanie A. Howard, Associate Professor and Program Director of Biblical and Theological Studies, Fresno Pacific University, CA. Commentary on Matthew 5:13-20 for Workingpreacher.org.
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-513-20-5>

³ Ibid.

there after worship. Feel free to let me know if I got this one wrong. I have to admit that I don't sing it by myself. I sing it in children's time in worship or with Augustana's Early Learning Center kids during their chapel time. Every so often we'll sing it after the sermon as a Hymn of the Day in response to the sermon.⁴ Mostly we sing it together. "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." I like that it's a together thing because it gets at what Jesus announces to his disciples.

Notice that Jesus isn't telling them what to do. He's describing something, not prescribing it.⁵ Jesus is telling them what they already are – salt and light. Be salty (a note to the gamers among us, not the kind of salty that means bitter). Don't hide your light. Let your light shine and, in doing so, the good works that come from the light will point to God. It's a subtle point but it's an important one. We talk a lot in Lutheran Christian circles about God's movement to us. God showing up in Jesus. We don't build a ladder to God. God brings God's self to us. When we hear this, more than a few of us might be thinking, "Ruh roh, I don't think I'm salt and light, God must have missed me with the saltshaker because I can be a real jerk." This may be your good news day because of course we can be jerks. But God calls us back by our baptisms, over and over again, to remind us that we are salt and light and that we are free to be salt and light. We, the church, all y'all, are salt and light together. Being salt and light is a group experience that leads to group projects. The church word for group project is ministry.

That's why Jesus' speech about the law and commandments follow the salt and light comments. Not as a way to lord righteousness over our neighbors or as a performance to get their attention.⁶ Rather, commandments are given to us as a way to live well with our neighbors, to be who God says we are in relationship with our neighbors. The Gospel of Matthew can be tricky because it appears that there was stress within the 1st century Matthean community between Jews and Jewish Christians. Some readings like ours today are an example of that 1st century stress and can be misconstrued to be anti-Jew or anti-law, as if somehow Jesus found the Jewish tradition obsolete and in need of an overhaul.⁷ The verses

⁴ Hymn of the Day is the song sung after the sermon, usually connected to one of the Bible readings or the preacher's sermon.

⁵ Howard, Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

about following the law connect Jesus' teaching with Moses – not as a split, as an extension of the covenant.⁸ Our reading from the book of Isaiah says that feeding the hungry, covering the naked, and loosening the bonds of injustice by freeing the oppressed shall break forth your light like the dawn.

In the last few weeks, one of my Rabbi friends and I were in a conversation about a public comment that I had made about Christians and Jews being “cousins in the faith.” It’s something I’ve said before in different places, but I suddenly questioned my thinking out loud and added that I’d need to double check that statement. In our follow-up conversation, Rabbi Brian aligned with the expression, “cousins in the faith” because it acknowledges that both Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism grew like branches from the trunk of the Hebrew Bible that Christians call the Old Testament. Rabbinic Judaism grew like one branch while Christianity grew like another branch at about the same time during the 1st century.⁹

A few weeks after this conversation with Rabbi Brian, I brought your congregational greetings from Augustana to the residents of Kavod Senior Life, a Jewish hosted residence for older adults just a few blocks west from our building. It was Holocaust Remembrance Day, commemorating the liberation of Auschwitz, a concentration camp during World War II, and honoring the lives of over 6 million Jews who were murdered along with millions of non-Jews - Poles, Russians, Roma, disabled people, political opponents, and LGBTQ folks - and the many who survived to live and remember, including honoring a few survivors who were there that day. The event at Kavod was reverent and hopeful. Rabbi Steve, Kavod’s chaplain, organized the event and invited me as both a Christian pastor of a neighboring congregation and as a resource for their Christian residents.¹⁰ One of the leaders during the event was Cantor Zachary Kutner, a 97-year-old holocaust survivor who sang the signature prayer of remembrance.¹¹ His voice was as boldly life-filled as it was mind-blowing, chanting from quiet meditation to loud exuberance and back again. As we continue this year’s journey through the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rabbi Brian Field, Denver, CO. Founding and Former Rabbi of Judaism Your Way.

¹⁰ Rabbi Steve Booth-Nadav, Chaplain, Kavod Senior Life, and Director of Multifaith Leadership Forum in Denver.

¹¹ El Malei Rachamim is a Jewish prayer for the dead.

Gospel of Matthew, it matters how we talk and think about our Jewish cousins in the faith. Let's keep talking and thinking.

"All ya'll are salt and light," Jesus said. Together as the church, we dip back into this baptismal promise on a daily, sometimes minute-to-minute, basis – resting not on human wisdom but on the power of God made vulnerable in Christ Jesus and him crucified.¹² The light of Christ shining through the cross is not permission to do whatever the heck we want when we want to. Christ's light gives us freedom to experience the transforming power of faith through our congregation, through all y'all.

Freedom that free us to admit when we've been jerks.

Freedom to experience forgiveness and try again to love God, love neighbor, and love ourselves.¹³

Freedom to be salt and light for the sake of this world God so loves.

Thanks be to God and amen.

¹² 1 Corinthians 2:1-2

¹³ Leviticus 19:18 and Luke 10:27 – Once again Jesus teaches within the Jewish tradition, "love your neighbor as yourself."